

Bull Creek, where did the name come from?

This is an expanded post of my history article for the August 2017 issue of the [NWACA Newsletter](#).

In last month's article we asked why is there a road named Bull Creek Road that is nowhere close to Bull Creek? That mystery solved, this month we ask where the name came from?

Let's start with the standard explanation, e.g. from the Austin History Center website: "Bull Creek Watershed is one of the most beautiful natural areas in Travis County. Once called Cascade, the name 'Bull' is said to have come from the last wild bison shot near the creek in the 1860s. Another source relates the name to the many longhorn cattle that once grazed in the area."

The valley of Bull Creek also used to be called Pleasant Valley, not to be confused with Pleasant Valley in South Austin. There was a Pleasant Valley School, AKA Bull Creek School, about where RM 2222 and Loop 360 meet; and recent research may have identified photos of what is called the CC Champion log cabin as the old one room Bull Creek School log cabin, and the Pleasant Valley School building that replaced it may have survived Loop 360 construction and now reside next to the fire station on Bull Creek (research in progress; not confirmed). But the name Pleasant Valley aside, let's focus on the debate about Bull Creek vs. Cascade Creek (which came first), and does the "Bull" refer to a buffalo or longhorn?

Bull Creek vs. Cascade Creek

A Texas General Land Office (GLO) map as early as 1861 shows the creek as "Bull Creek", but indications are it was going by both names. Here's a snippet from a letter to the editor of an Austin newspaper in 1866:

"Mr. Editor: It has often been asked, 'What's in a name?' ... We are of those who do not think that 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' .. [there is a beautiful stream among the adjacent hills ..]. It is known in common parlance as 'Bull Creek,' but the enterprising and aesthetic map publishers, recognizing the principle that we advocate, have very properly ignored such an antediluvian term, and with a spirit worthy of the age and 'land in which we live,' have adopted the pleasing and enticing name of 'Cascade Creek.' [Signed] Many Citizens".

The letter concludes “We should be pleased to have you drive out and enjoy the beauties of nature so bountifully provided, and take a cup of tea with you”. So common parlance was Bull Creek, but “Many Citizens” didn’t find that name pleasing and enticing.

Though this sounds like the name Cascade Creek was part of a re-branding scheme by the Chamber of Commerce, Board of Tourism or land speculators (“Austin, The Live Music Capital of the World!”) the roots of that name go back to when Texas was still a part of Mexico. In 1830 one Thomas Jefferson Chambers received Mexican citizenship and license to practice law. In 1834, he became the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas (still part of Mexico). In payment for services performed in this office, Chambers was granted by Mexico title to land which included what would later become the site of present day Austin. Buried in the Travis County Deed Records, in Chambers’ survey of land deeded him in 1835, there it is in Spanish, a reference to what may be the creeks’ very first name: *Arroyo Cascadero*. Cascade Creek.

Buffalo vs. Longhorn

Next debate; does the the “bull” in Bull Creek refer to buffalo or longhorns? This one is a bit tougher. This year, 2017, marked the 150th year celebration of the Chisholm Trail. From a website celebrating the 150th year anniversary: “The Chisholm Trail was the major route out of Texas for livestock. Although it was used only from 1867 to 1884, the longhorn cattle driven north along it provided a steady source of income that helped the impoverished state recover from the Civil War.”

The iconic longhorn cattle drives of *Lonesome Dove* were a post-Civil War, Reconstruction era phenomena. As the GLO map from 1861 shows, the name Bull Creek was clearly in use before the Civil War ended. Among the early Anglo settlers to Bull Creek were the Preeces. In an article from *Real West Magazine* (1964), Harold Preece claims the name is attributed to the killing of a male buffalo on Bull Creek by his great grandfather, William Martin Preece that came to Texas ca. 1838, while in other materials (letters) at the Austin History Center he cites his grandfather, Richard Lincoln Preece. In that letter he does also say he had been unable to confirm the story.

On the other hand, longhorns had been wandering around Texas since the days of the Spanish that introduced them; they may have been wondering around the creek before the Civil War.

So the jury is out? Well hold on. The USGS shows over 500 place names with "Bull Creek" in them, in more than 40 states including Alaska. Am guessing no longhorns in Alaska, but the original distribution of bison in North America ranged from Alaska to Mexico, and in some latitudes nearly coast to coast. I'm betting on the buffalo.

References

Austin History Center, Austin's Creeks: A Tribute to Tributaries, <http://www.austinlibrary.com/ahc/excreeks.htm>, retrieved 04/20/17

Map of Travis County, May 15, 1861 (texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph89016/: accessed April 20, 2017), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu; crediting Texas General Land Office. This is one of the earliest GLO maps I've found to use the name "Bull Creek".

The Southern Intelligencer. (Austin, Tex.), Vol. 2, No. 6, Ed. 1 Thursday, August 9, 1866. Article about Cascade Creek. Available on Portal to Texas History, <http://bit.ly/2oP9php>

Title of land, from the State of Coahuila and Texas (Mexico) to Thomas Jefferson Chambers, in payment for "Salary as Superior Judge of Texas". Dated June 20th, 1835. Travis County Deed Records: Deed Record C, pp. 419-421. Retrieved from Portal to Texas History, 7/16/2017 from <http://bit.ly/2uoalP>

Chisholm Trail 150 website; <http://chisholmtrail150.org/trail-history/texas-trail/>

Preece, Harold (1964). "My Grandfather, Dick Preece". *Real West*. VII (38): 22. Story of Richard Lincoln Preece, AKA Dick Preece: Republic era Texas Ranger fighting Comanches; member of the Mountain Eagles, a Unionist guerilla outfit fighting the Confederacy from Bull Creek; rancher during the days of the Chisholm Trail.

Jackson, Clementine (Walden). *The Walden home in the valley* (book). 1966, Austin, Texas. Copy available in Austin History Center. A history of Bull Creek and the Walden family, early settlers there. Clementine is one of those claiming the name Bull Creek referred to longhorn cattle that used to graze there.

U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)



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